

## **School Truancy and Compulsory Education Amendments H.B. 207**

Many groups of professionals, including PTA leaders, child advocates and school administrators, feel strongly that truancy (or excessive school absenteeism) is a "gateway" problem. Public schools of all kinds MUST have students attending regularly to help combat additional and growing concerns about adequate student academic performance, drugs, harassment, school violence, gangs, and community vandalism. School administrators report that students disciplined for more serious crimes or school policy violations ALWAYS have a history of excessive absenteeism.

The Statewide Association of Prosecutors has agreed that if the language of the law changes to require parents and school personnel to work together to resolve excessive absenteeism, prosecutors will have consistent standards to work with parents and schools.

Excessive absenteeism IS a significant problem among a limited number of elementary-age students. Records maintained for 33 elementary schools in Granite School District for the 2005-06 school year indicate that 11% of the students (2352 students) had more than five unexcused absences during the school year.

Truancy intervention works! Of the 33 elementary schools monitored by Granite District, 86% of students began attending school on a regular basis after an initial intervention. An additional 83% of the remaining truant students had the same response after a second intervention, leaving only 1% of the population of truant students who required even minimal court involvement.

Secondary students had a similar response: 76% of truant junior high and 80% of senior high school students responded to an initial intervention. A second intervention resulted in a significant 76% response among the remaining junior high students (and their parents) and 59% response among truant senior high students.

The bill leaves the definition of "excused absence" to school and school district discretion. The bill allows for schools to excuse students due to individual student and family explanations and circumstances. (See Section 53A-11-101(9), lines 205-310 and Section 53A-11-103(2)(e), line 386).

The bill focuses on working with parents of younger children. There are not increased or enhanced or criminal penalties for parents of school-age minors over 14. The bill includes many directives and steps for school personnel directing and encouraging them to work with parents before parents are referred to court. The focus is on COOPERATION between parents and schools.

With increasing federal and state emphasis and student achievement--and commensurate punishments and rewards for schools--schools MUST have the tools to compel attendance and the law must give certain unresponsive parents incentives to work with schools on student attendance issues.

The bill does not apply to parents/students lawfully released for home schooling. There are ample due process and parents' rights protections. These include: (a) at least 10 absences without valid excuse before school personnel will consider the student and parents in violation of compulsory attendance; (b) the requirement for parents to receive mailed or personal notice from schools of their children's excessive absenteeism; (c) the requirement for school personnel to consider parent-proposed alternatives in resolving student attendance problems; and (d) local discussion of "valid excuses" for student absence.

There is sufficient deference for local community differences, e.g. schools/school districts define "valid excuse," districts use the law as a base--they can provide more interventions and notice to parents--as resources allow--about student attendance concerns than the law requires.